# The Study of The Dissemination of Chinese Language in Africa—The Case of Cameroon

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## ABSTRACT

The dissemination of Chinese language in contemporary Africa is inextricably linked to economic, social and academic factors. Taking Cameroon as an example, this paper uses behaviorism and postmodernism theories to analyze the collected data, and discusses the factors and important roles of Chinese language and Chinese language studies from a different perspective from many international critics. This paper examines the analysis and discussion of the reasons for the international spread of Chinese by scholars and critics in other countries; then through open and closed questionnaires, analyzes the learner's motivation and related research. The author puts forward suggestions for Chinese teaching in Africa. Through data analysis, it is found that the main factors that drive Cameroonians to learn Chinese and study China are: the prospect of getting a Chinese translation job, the desire to get a scholarship to study in China, and the various factors that the Chinese market has to satisfy one's purchasing power with various goods. Through the research, it can be concluded that China's prosperous economy as a whole constitutes an external stimulus for Chinese language dissemination and Chinese research in Cameroon; at the same time, there are obstacles in Chinese language dissemination, and countermeasures need to be taken: adjusting and changing the teaching methods of Chinese teachers, In order to avoid negative impact on learners' interest in learning; take measures to change Cameroonians' preconceptions about Chinese, Chinese characters and the whole Chinese society; at the same time, add practical courses and provide rich learning resources.

**Key Words**: Contemporary, Africa, Spread of Chinese, motivation, Cameroon

## INTRODUCTION

The learning of Chinese language by foreigners can be traced back to the 16th century, when some European missionaries came to China to preach the Gospel and also learn some basic Chinese language and culture (Liu, 2002). In Africa, during the same period in the 16th century, some Chinese businessmen would go to some African countries, where they used to do business with Africans, and they would learn Chinese from them in order to communicate better (Manyeruke & Mhandara, 2011). Therefore, Africans have a long history of learning Chinese. With the deepening of economic exchanges, it can be said that Chinese is emerging in Africa. In recent years, as Chinese language as a powerful global language has been widely used by Chinese learners around the world, the popularity and international status of Chinese has also continued to rise. The emergence of Chinese fever around the world is closely related to China's economic development. China's economic attractiveness allows people from many other countries to have the opportunity to deal with Chinese organizations. In this context, there will be more and more people learning

Chinese. This research will explore the (recent) international dissemination and research of Chinese language, with a particular focus on the specific situation of Chinese language education in Cameroon.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have already been conducted on the spread of Chinese in Africa. These studies provide the basis for our research. The following is a review of studies relevant to the research.Jeffrey (2008) used Chinese politics and its affiliates to promote Chinese language worldwide as a strategy and tool to promote China's soft power policy. The author believes that although China has vigorously promoted Chinese language learning, established a good Chinese image and attracted a large number of learners, there are still many obstacles. Our research differs from the other scholars by taking Cameroon as an example to explore the causal relationship between China's economic strength and the boom in Chinese language learning in Africa. Unlike Jeffrey (2008), we believe that Chinese politics will help to create a positive image of China and the Chinese language in the world, and contribute to the international spread of Chinese.Kroon, Jan and Dong (2013) study the behavior of Chinese in modern languages. The authors argue that Chinese has become an everyday language for both China and overseas Chinese. They argue that Chinese language has become, or has always been, a national language. The authors still believe that Chinese language will eventually surpass English as a world social language. They make it clear that although fewer people learn Chinese than those who learn English, Chinese is gradually expanding its influence as a global language. For example, the export of Chinese goods around the world has made Chinese characters ubiquitous in Western households—in the form of printing on product labels and user product manuals. Because of this factor, the Chinese language has spread almost all over the world. But there is no language exchange in this process. So it's just being spread like an empty symbol, and for non-Chinese speakers, it has no value for communication (except for stating that the product is from China).Liu (2008) conducted a similar study. Similar to his method, this study investigates the continued growth in the number of Chinese language learners in Cameroon. The data collection method is also the same, using the hot spring survey method, however, the 100 respondents in Liu's study were all from the capital city of Yaounde. In order to make this study more credible and reliable, this study expanded the scope of the survey respondents to four major cities where Chinese language was taught. Different from scholars, this article has a total of 400 questionnaires, which were distributed to middle school students, college students majoring in Sinology and students majoring in Chinese in higher normal universities. In addition, Liu's research was developed in 2008, and the situation of Chinese language teaching in Cameroon has undergone major changes. For example, Liu Shenming believes that there are only four Chinese teachers in Cameroon, two of them are Chinese teachers from the Confucius Institute, the other two are native Chinese teachers in Cameroon, and one of the others has retired. The current situation is far from what she described in this passage. In the past ten years, many things have changed, and the Chinese for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC) has recruited many Chinese volunteer teachers to teach Chinese at various learning centers in Cameroon. At the same time, Cameroon currently has a specialized school to train local Chinese teachers.Yi (2012) studied Chinese learning problems of Cameroonian students. The author makes a case study by taking students majoring in Chinese at the Maroua branch of the Confucius Institute at the University of Yaounde II in Cameroon as an example. He studies the pronunciation problems of Chinese learners in Cameroon, the types of phonetic errors and the causes of errors. Scholars' research shows that Cameroonian students cannot distinguish between aspirated and unaspirated Chinese sounds, which is an important contribution to academic research. In addition, he made a table in the paper to summarize the motivation of Chinese learners at Maroua Branch. Its research shows that 79.78% of people (71 people) started learning Chinese because this language may have many advantages in employment, second only to 85.39% (76 research subjects) who are interested in Chinese emotional dramas. Taking this study into full consideration, we believe that the number of respondents is not large enough to apply the findings to Chinese language learning in Cameroon as a whole.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Investigation Method

The target population of this study is Chinese language learners in Cameroon. In order to obtain reliable results and properly describe the current situation of sinology in Cameroon, the researcher used the probability sampling method to conduct a questionnaire survey on the sample population. This method ensures that the selection process is completely random. The advantage of using probability sampling is the accuracy of post-experimental statistical methods. It can also be used to estimate population parameters because it is representative of the entire population, which is also a reliable way to remove sampling bias.

### Questionnaire Participants

The subjects of this research are students from the Confucius Institute at the Second University of Cameroon, Chinese majors at the Higher Normal University of Maroua Branch, master students in Sinology at the University of Maroua, Chinese language students from the Douala Branch, and Chinese language learning in two other high schools in the country. They not only come from all parts of Cameroon, but also include a considerable number of Chinese learners from other African countries due to Cameroon's economic development and political stability. This sampling range will provide a broad view of the specific circumstances of Chinese language learning and will strengthen the validity of the findings, which are more representative due to the fact that the respondents selected for this study cover different cities in Cameroon.

### Students Basic Information

The survey was conducted with a total of 200 participants from the cities of Douala, Yaounde, Maroua and Soa. These cities were chosen because they are currently experiencing a history of development of Chinese language and Sinology. The first center for learning Chinese in Cameroon was implemented in Yaounde, and it is the only Confucius Institute located in that city. Cameroon's only master's program in Chinese language is located at Maroua University. The city of Maroua also has a Teachers' Training College, where local Chinese language teachers are trained. The city of Douala is an international city, and there are many people learning Chinese language at one of the annexes of Confucius Institute. It is from these sample population studies that we can make inferences about the entire population. Adopting a compromise approach in data will give our findings a high degree of validity and reliability.The table below lists the nationalities of the respondents. The questionnaire was conducted in five international cities selected in Cameroon. In order to ensure that all learners have an equal opportunity to participate, the respondents were randomly selected. After collecting the questionnaire responses, we realized that not all respondents were from Cameroon, citizens from other countries also participated in this work, as all of them are from African countries, this only strengthens the practicality of this work.

Table 1: Number of participants

| Nationalities | Number of students |
|---|---|
| Cameroon | 190 |
| Central African Republic | 3 |
| Republic of Congo | 2 |
| DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo) | 1 |
| Chad | 2 |
| Equatorial Guinea | 1 |

| Nigeria | 1 |
|---|---|
| Valid questionnaires | 200 |

Of the total 200 respondents, 112 were women, accounting for 56%, and the remaining 44% were men, as shown in the table below:

Table 2: Participants' Gender

| Gender | |
|---|---|
| Male | Female |
| 44% | 56% |

The analysis of these findings clearly describes the numerical advantage of women over men when learning Chinese in Cameroon. However, there does not appear to be any empirical scientific research to support this hypothesis, despite the general trend in academia that more women than men are engaged in language studies. The second question of our questionnaire attempts to pinpoint the age category of their language learners. When understanding Chinese language learning in Cameroon, it is important to address the age of the learners, so that the teaching content, materials and activities can be better adapted to their age. Empirical research shows that learners of different ages have different preferences for learning styles. Regarding this question, it is very clear from our findings that in Cameroon, 19-23 year old constitute the thematic segment of the Chinese language learning population, followed closely by 15-18 year old, and finally 24-30 year old students, as shown in the table below.

Table 3: Participants' Age

| Age Range | Less than 14 | 15-18 | 19-23 | 24-30 | 30-40 | 40 and above |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Perccentage | 3.75% | 32.5% | 35.25% | 25.5% | 2.25% | 0.75% |

There is a non-negligible number of learners under the age of 14 who are also learning Chinese, which is undoubtedly the ideal age to start learning and mastering a second language. These statistics show that many Chinese language learners in Cameroon begin learning Chinese at the age of possible acquisition. Therefore, it will be very important to enhance Chinese language acquisition by improving the quality of teaching materials and designing teaching materials more suitable for learners of these ages. This can be done by adapting course content and teaching materials to meet the needs and desires of learners, and more importantly designing textbooks that are tailored to topics and related content of particular interest to Cameroon's youth population, more specialized teaching material designs will be very welcome.In addition, we will also look at the length of learning time for Chinese learners.

Table 4: Length of learning time for Chinese learners

| Learning time | Within half a year | 1-2 years | 3-4 years | More than 4 years | Others |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Percentage | 20.25% | 30% | 32.5% | 11% | 6.75% |

Data gathered from this question shows that most learners spend relatively long periods of time learning Chinese language, and that longer periods of study can guarantee better proficiency. Furthermore, these learners are either middle school students or high school students. In Cameroon, the secondary education cycle is 7 years, which is the number of years required to complete the learning tasks of junior high school and high school, and it takes five years to learn foreign languages such as Chinese language. Systematic foreign language learning takes 2 years, and Chinese language and other foreign language learning starts from the third year (foreign language teaching policy of the Ministry of Secondary Education in Cameroon).

## RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Learning Purpose

The purpose of most students to learn Chinese is to be able to reach a level close to that of a native speaker. And this question is a multiple-choice question, because the HSK test is a prerequisite for applying for the scholarship, and 52.5% said they want to pass the test. Their ultimate goal, however, is to reach a level of language proficiency closer to native speakers'. Others also want to develop their speaking skills, but they want to master vocabulary relevant to their profession. Other students also gave rich answers; their main purpose of going to the Confucius Institute is to deeply understand China's ideology, politics, economy, trade, history and other aspects. In the process of learning Chinese, they may also develop an interest in the language. Here again, the role of the teacher comes into play. The basic qualities and skills of teachers should be fully displayed in the classroom, so that those students who are uncertain about their attention can feel the joy of learning Chinese language.

### Learning Motivation

According to the results of our survey, the vast majority of students have both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for learning Chinese. This can be observed from their attitudes toward the language: they do not perceive Chinese as a very difficult language. They take a more proactive approach outside formal classroom settings, creating more opportunities to practice their spoken Chinese language. From the data collected, we can observe that students have different reasons for learning Chinese language: 47% of students would like to have greater chances of going to China, 38% would like to have greater careers in the future, 33% are really interested in Chinese language, 26% are interested in Chinese history and culture, 12% believe Chinese is a trending language nowadays, while 8% have other reasons for learning the language. In the responses received, many participants mentioned using WeChat(one of the popular social media app used in China) to communicate with young people in China to enhance their language skills. Some individuals establish connections with local Chinese people in markets, construction sites, and other places, regularly engaging in conversations to practice their spoken Chinese and improve their language skills. This spontaneous initiative has a significant impact on learners' language skills, as most of them indicated in the survey that they do not consider Chinese to be a very difficult language. The belief that Chinese is a mysterious and hard-to-understand language is, to some extent, influenced by biases deep within their hearts.

### Stereotypes

In sociology, stereotypes are defined as a social group's cognitive perception of another social group (Eilligan, 2008). Within the framework of the analysis conducted in this study, this should be considered a working definition of the term "stereotype." Therefore, we will examine Cameroonian students' stereotypes of China and the impact of these stereotypes on their learning and acquisition of Chinese. The question "When you hear the word 'China,' what comes to your mind?" yielded interesting responses. Even though their knowledge of China may be somewhat limited, it is evident that they still hold certain preconceptions about the country. From the responses to this question, it is apparent that China is viewed as an impressive country in the eyes of Cameroonians. Most students who received the questionnaire have a relatively deep understanding of China's recent developments. They perceive China's technological achievents as something worth emulating or learning from.

### Learning Dynamics

From the data we have gathered, it is evident that learners have a positive attitude towards learning Chinese.

Over 43% of students believe that Chinese is not difficult to learn. In general, 59.25% of learners maintain a positive attitude toward learning Chinese, which is a prerequisite for successful learning. Therefore, it can be affirmed that the enthusiasm of Chinese learners in Cameroon is high.

Gardner (1985) defined motivation as the sum of the desire for effort and goal achievement, combined with a positive attitude toward the goals to be achieved. The results of this section indicate that learners meet these prerequisites for language learning, which greatly assists them in mastering the target language skills smoothly.

**Learning Content and Learning Difficulties**

Undoubtedly, Chinese characters pose a challenge for foreign learners, including students in Cameroon. The Chinese writing system, composed of characters, is entirely different from the Western writing system, which consists of 26 letters. Students with a background in the Roman alphabet often find Chinese characters challenging, especially when they initially start learning them, making it quite overwhelming. More than half of the respondents (51.50%) indicated that mastering Chinese characters is the most challenging aspect of learning Chinese. However, even though it was a multiple-choice question, the percentage of students who considered grammar the most challenging part of learning Chinese (22.25%) was significantly lower.

A smaller number of students (15.50%) identified tones as the most difficult aspect of the Chinese learning process. Most languages in Cameroon are tonal, which helps students in explaining and mastering the phenomenon of tones in Chinese. The change in tone for a word or even a phrase can alter its meaning, a remarkable similarity between Chinese and most African languages, making it easier for African/Cameroonian students to acquire the ability to express tones in Chinese.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Eliminating Stereotypes and Prejudices

Due to the harmful impact of stereotypes and prejudices, Africans and Cameroonians, in particular, need to make a genuine commitment to actively eliminate their biases and prejudices against China and the Chinese people. In many African countries, the term "Made in China" carries a negative connotation, and many Africans tend to perceive Chinese products as inherently inferior or counterfeit, although this generalization does not apply to all product categories. Currently, most Chinese products sold in the African market cater to mass purchasing power; however, China also produces high-quality, high-value products, and it is possible to dispel biases and prejudices held by foreigners towards China.

To achieve this, the first step is acknowledging our common humanity and admitting that we indeed harbor racial biases. Next, we should pay closer attention to our inner thoughts and feelings and how they influence our beliefs and actions. When we have stereotypes about a racial group, we should replace these impressions with alternative thoughts based on factual information. Exposure to people of different races by stepping out of our comfort zones is one way to gain this factual information. We should be willing to engage in honest conversations about racial issues, even when these dialogues may be difficult, challenging, or uncomfortable.

## Encouraging Learners

The emphasis on motivational factors in second language acquisition cannot be overstated. Motivation plays a crucial role in second language learning, and teachers should highlight motivational factors to encourage

students to learn the language effectively and achieve their goals. The respondents exhibit a generally positive attitude toward learning Chinese, serving as a significant motivation for their efforts to master the language. However, another group of learners (40.75%) does not harbor a very positive attitude toward learning Chinese, but this does not equate to a lack of learning motivation. Considering Chinese as a difficult language to learn may be just a cognitive perception, and when faced with the temptation of rewards, it can stimulate their determination to learn Chinese.

Moreover, a considerable number of respondents filled out the questionnaire in their first semester of Chinese language study, so their initial impression of Mandarin being challenging is quite normal. However, it does not rule out the possibility that some learners who initially perceive Chinese as difficult may eventually give up. This is why it is necessary to design strategies to motivate students, and even cultivate a more positive attitude towards learning Chinese. For those who view Chinese as a challenging language, the author recommends that teachers delve deeper into understanding how to motivate students to learn Chinese. Motivating learners can have a positive impact on their attitudes and learning outcomes. A student with a positive attitude toward language is likely to continue learning and believe in their language learning potential, and motivation can be achieved through inspiring speeches, demystifying the enigmatic aspects of learning Chinese.

## Improving Chinese Character Teaching Methods

Many Chinese characters have a relatively close relationship with everyday life phenomena for students. Teachers and textbook editors can make this relationship more apparent. Once students can associate the structure of a character with its meaning and something related to their daily life or cultural concepts, they will find it easier to understand the character's meaning. In this way, these characters, for African Chinese learners, will not be seen as merely a kind of hasty and mysterious strokes. The author believes that the design of this method of explaining Chinese characters should be based on the specific culture of each African society.

The author strongly advocates for sensory input and interpretation of Chinese characters, especially when learners first encounter Chinese characters in the early stages of learning. This is what we call "democratizing" pictograms, and by "democratizing," we mean enabling foreign learners to use Chinese characters. We argue for a position in the academic field that adds tenants to the liberalization model— interpreting characters based on new cognitive models and cultural protection, mainly maintaining a strictly adhered-to interpretive model of pictograms based on Chinese culture. We believe that explaining Chinese characters based on models will stimulate and attract more senses, making it easier for learners to associate Chinese characters with meanings and even making it easier for them to remember how to write Chinese characters.

## Providing Online Learning (E-learning) Resources

E-learning refers to the use of electronic technology to access educational courses outside traditional classrooms. In most cases, it refers to fully online courses, programs, or degrees, and there are many terms used to describe learning conducted online via the internet, ranging from distance education to computer-based e-learning, online learning, and web-based learning, among others.

If the Chinese Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC) and schools offering Chinese courses for foreign students could pay more attention to online learning as a means of disseminating the Chinese language, online Chinese courses would play a significant role. In today's Africa, we have moved away from the era where the internet was a luxury for the privileged class. The internet has injected new momentum into the globalization process, fundamentally making the world a multilingual cyberspace (Dor, 2004). According to estimates by the online marketing company Global Reach, in 2003, there were about

230 million users in English-based internet communities, while non-English community users numbered 403 million. It is estimated that in 2004, there were 280 million English users and no fewer than 657 million non-English users. Furthermore, the absolute number of languages used on the internet is rapidly increasing: current statistics show that there are 27 representative languages on the internet, and many other languages are trying to join this club (Dor, 2004). Innovative internet technologies also contribute to language learning, providing language learners with more choices and enhancing motivation for pursuing careers and business globally. Online courses can be created and accessed in an unprecedentedly simple way (Chen and Liu, 2008). However, few online courses can last for an extended period, and most materials available online are related to specific project videos, such as vocabulary and grammar.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research is to explore the complexity of Chinese language dissemination in Cameroon. To achieve this objective, we conducted a survey of 200 Chinese language learners in selected key regions of Cameroon. While Chinese language learners in Cameroon exhibit high learning enthusiasm, there is still a need for a review of teaching methods and frameworks. This indicates that the growth in the number of Chinese language learners in Cameroon is a result of external stimuli. The rise of the prosperous Chinese economy, opportunities such as translation and interpretation work, the availability of sales assistant positions in Chinese businesses and companies in Cameroon and across Africa, as well as the emulation of successful Chinese economic models, have been significant motivating factors for Cameroonians to learn Chinese. Therefore, this work unveils the complexity behind the emergence of Chinese language and sinology research in Cameroon. Understanding learners' motivations contributes to better preparation of course content and teaching methods by teachers and other stakeholders to meet their needs.

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